'"A Victory for God": The Scottish Presbyterian Churches and the General Strike of 1926'

Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 42, No. 4, October 1991

'A Victory for God': The Scottish Presbyterian Churches and the General Strike of 1926

by STEWART J. BROWN

During the final months of the First World War, the General Assemblies of the two major Presbyterian Churches in Scotland – the established Church of Scotland and the voluntary United Free Church – committed themselves to work for the thorough reconstruction of Scottish society. Church leaders promised to work for a new Christian commonwealth, ending the social divisions and class hatred that had plagued pre-war Scottish industrial society. Bound together through the shared sacrifice of the war, the Scottish people would be brought back to the social teachings of Christianity and strive together to realise the Kingdom of God. The Churches would end their deference to the laws of nineteenth-century political economy, with their emphasis on individualism, self-interest and competition, and embrace new imperatives of collective responsibility and co-operation. Along with the healing of social divisions, church leaders also pledged to end the ecclesiastical divisions in Scottish Presbyterianism. The final months of the war brought a revival of the pre-war movement to unite the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church into a single National Church, and Scottish ecclesiastical leaders held forth to a weary nation the vision of a united National Church leading a covenanted Christian commonwealth in pursuit of social justice and harmony.

The post-war economic stagnation and industrial unrest, however, soon threw a shadow over the Churches' promises. In the face of continued social division, the Churches lost confidence in their social witness and withdrew from their pledges to work for social reconstruction. This withdrawal was dramatically illustrated during the General Strike of 1926. Unwilling to risk alienating the propertied classes, and unable to understand the deep feelings of exploitation and injustice among labouring men and women, Church leaders declined to speak out boldly for a just settlement to the crisis as well as for social peace, and in many cases showed a bias against organised labour. They deferred to the laws

of political economy and declared that the Church had no competence to criticise industrial capitalism or the existing class system. The effects of the events of 1926 for the social influence of Scottish Presbyterianism have been profound. The two Presbyterian Churches were united with impressive ceremony in 1929. But the reunited National Church of Scotland became largely a Church of the middle classes, a Church that for the remainder of the inter-war period was more concerned with ecclesiastical administration and shepherding its existing congregations than with proclaiming the Kingdom of God to the whole nation.

The impact of the General Strike on Scottish Presbyterianism received dramatic treatment by the Scottish novelist, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, in the third of his *A Scots Quair* trilogy, *Cloud Howe* – the haunting story of the Revd Robert Colquhoun's struggle to fulfil his Church's wartime promises and to realise the Kingdom of God amid the economic distress of the 1920s. With the exception of Grassic Gibbon's fictional account, however, the activities of the Scottish Churches during the crisis of 1926 have received little attention. This has not been true of the Churches in England. Their response to the General Strike has been examined, most notably in biographies of two archbishops of Canterbury, Randall Davidson and William Temple, and recently in an excellent article by Stuart Mews.[1] As these studies have shown, a number of Church leaders in England rose above the class conflict and worked not only for peace and reconciliation, but also for social justice. In Scotland, the story was different. This essay will explore the response of the largest Scottish Presbyterian Churches to the crisis, against the backdrop of their wartime commitments to social reconstruction and their efforts to achieve Church Union.

The First World War was devastating in its effects on Scottish society. An estimated 110,000 young Scots were killed – a higher proportion than in any other country in the Empire – and tens of thousands more were incapacitated by wounds or shattered psychologically.[2] At home, there was wartime deprivation and labour unrest, especially in Glasgow and the west of Scotland. For Scottish Presbyterians, this terrible human carnage could not be viewed as mere accident in a world under the sovereignty of God, and in 1916 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland appointed a special commission on the war, to explore its moral and spiritual meaning. The war, this Commission proclaimed in its first report, presented in May 1917, was nothing less than a visitation from God – a divine judgement on the competitive, self-interested, and materialistic pre-war society. It was also a summons to corporate

[1] G. K. A. Bell, *Randall Davidson: archbishop of Canterbury*, ii, Oxford 1935, 1304–24; F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple: archbishop of Canterbury*, Oxford 1948, 328–44; S. Mews, 'The Churches', in M. Morris (ed.), *The General Strike*, London 1976, 318–37.

[2] C. Harvie, *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Scotland 1914–1980*, London 1981, 24; T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830–1950*, London 1986, 267.

repentance, 'a call to national and social reformation of national and social evils'. Amid the horrors of the war, Christians were not to succumb to fatalism, not to perceive of the world as driven by blind, inexorable natural laws. God was sovereign and active in history, and through the shared sacrifice and corporate exertions demanded by this ordeal, God was showing the way to a new social order based on justice, fellowship and co-operation.[3] 'It is for the Church', the report of 1917 continued,

> inspired by the vision of the Kingdom of God, to use the occasion provided in the providence of God for the purpose of securing a drastic and permanent amelioration of social conditions. 'Never again' must be her watchword as she contemplates the chaos of pre-war conditions.... The people who have nobly borne the burden and patiently endured the calamities of the war [must] find recompense in a worthier social environment.[4]

After 1917 the General Assemblies of both the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church committed themselves to work for the creation of the new social commonwealth. During the final months of the war the two Churches held joint conferences on housing and industrial reorganisation, and expressed support for the proposals of the wartime coalition government's Committee on Reconstruction.[5]

The final months of the war also brought a revival of the movement to unite the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church – a movement which had begun in earnest in 1908 but which had been interrupted by the outbreak of war. In 1918 Presbyterian leaders returned to the work of ending the divisions that had plagued Scottish Presbyterianism since the eighteenth century. The Church Union negotiations had proved difficult before the war. Although the two Churches shared essentially the same doctrine, liturgy and Presbyterian organisation, there were significant differences in their conception of the Church's relationship to the State (the Church of Scotland was an established Church while the United Free Church was opposed to any Church–State connection). While Church leaders were now confident that, after the shared ordeal of the war, their differences could be overcome, they also recognised that the achievement of ecclesiastical Union alone would not restore the National Church to the authority it had once exercised in Scotland. If the Churches were to exercise leadership in post-war reconstruction (the Church of Scotland Commission on the War reported in 1919), they would need to identify more closely 'with the efforts and aspirations of the masses' and demonstrate themselves to be the Church of the whole nation.[6] 'Our aim',

[3] 'Report of the commission on the war in relation to its spiritual, moral, and social issues', in *Reports on the Schemes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, 1917, 723–58.

[4] Ibid. 753.

[5] 'Report of the commission on the war', ibid. 1918, 619–33; 1919, 631–91; *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland*, 1918, 206–11; 1919, 244–7; W. P. Paterson and D. Watson (eds), *Social Evils and Problems*, Edinburgh 1918, esp. pp. 1–27.

[6] 'Report of the commission on the war', in *Reports on the Schemes*, 1919, 645.

the Commission on the War had proclaimed in 1918, 'must be under God to make Scotland a Christian country in fact as well as name, to realise the vision of our forefathers, and to build on Scottish fields a true city of God.'[7] This would require winning the confidence of the working classes, especially the unskilled urban labourers who were largely outside all organised religion.

The Scottish Presbyterian commitment to social reconstruction was dramatically expressed in May 1919 at the first post-war meetings of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland established a permanent Church and Nation Committee, which was to gather information and formulate proposals for reconstruction. The United Free Church Assembly enlarged its Social Problems committee, and instructed it to work closely with the Church of Scotland's Church and Nation Committee. In his closing address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the moderator, Professor W. P. Paterson, asserted that the ordeal of the war had reawakened the Church to her responsibilities to the entire nation. The great failure of the nineteenth-century Church, Paterson maintained, had been her acquiescence 'in the dogma of the economists, that every man ought intelligently to pursue his obvious private interests, and that thus the general good would be assured'.[8] The nation, however, was no longer prepared to defer to nineteenth-century political economy; after the horrors and shared sacrifices of the war, there was a new recognition 'that the laws of God demand to be applied in all spheres, including the political and economic'. There was general agreement 'that, as it was the nation as a whole which did the work and endured the agony of the war, so there should be a more equitable distribution among all classes of the blessings of our splendid modern civilisation'. Scotland must now 'covenant together' for the building of the new society.[9]

By the early 1920s, however, the prospects for significant post-war social reconstruction were fading throughout Britain. The victory of the Conservative-dominated coalition at the general election of November 1918 had been followed by the rapid dismantling of wartime economic controls and the scrapping or radical reduction of wartime proposals for social reconstruction. The Government now determined upon a return to *laissez-faire* capitalism and respect for the 'economic laws' as the best path to post-war recovery.[10] The Franchise Act of 1918, which established democracy in Britain, also brought a dramatic increase in the electoral

[7] Ibid. 1918, 629.

[8] W. P. Paterson, *Recent History and the Call to Brotherhood: address delivered at the close of the General Assembly, May 29, 1919*, Edinburgh 1919, 32.

[9] Ibid. 32, 8.

[10] R. H. Tawney, 'The abolition of economic controls, 1918–1921', *Economic History Review* xiii (1943), 1–30; P. Abrams, 'The failure of social reform, 1918–1920', *Past and Present* xxiv (1963), 43–64.

fortunes of the Labour party in Scotland. In late 1920 the brief post-war economic boom ended, and Britain entered a period of economic stagnation. The Scottish economy, dependent on heavy industry and the export of coal, was especially hard-hit, and unemployment rose to over 18 per cent by 1921.[11] The Liberal party, which had dominated Scottish politics from the 1830s up to the end of the war, was divided into warring factions. The Scottish middle classes, anxious over the erosion of their economic security, began turning from the divided Liberals to the Conservative party, which increasingly based its party propaganda on anti-socialism. The propertied classes looked nervously at events in Russia, where the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War raised fears that revolution and class warfare would spread to Western Europe. Their fears were heightened by the Troubles in Ireland, and the danger that sectarian violence would be imported into the Scoto-Irish communities in the west of Scotland.[12] Within the Scottish working classes, many responded to industrial stagnation and unemployment by rejecting conciliatory pre-war Lib-Lab policies, and embracing a militant socialism. A group of emotional, idealistic Labour leaders, their roots in the wartime industrial unrest, emerged to leadership in Glasgow and the west.[13] By 1922 the Scoto-Irish Catholic community in the west of Scotland had shifted its support from the Liberal party to Labour, and in the general election of November 1922 Labour won twenty-nine of Scotland's seventy-four parliamentary seats, including ten of the fifteen Glasgow-area seats.[14] Labour became Scotland's main opposition party.

The Scotland of the early 1920s was far from the Christian commonwealth which Presbyterian ministers and elders had envisaged at the General Assemblies of 1919. The Government was now committed to restoring the *laissez-faire* capitalist system which general assembly committees had condemned with such memorable vehemence. Presbyterian clergymen who retained their wartime commitment to building the Christian commonwealth found themselves severely criticised by propertied Church members who increasingly associated Christian social reconstruction with the Labour party. In 1920 the Church and Nation Committee of the Church of Scotland decided in the face of these social and political divisions to end its call for social and industrial reconstruction. 'The difficulty', observed W. P. Paterson in his diary on 20 January 1920, 'is that we either make a statement of platitudes which is futile, or take a Christian Socialist line which is dangerous and

[11] G. Brown, *Maxton*, Edinburgh 1986, 110–11; S. Cooper, 'John Wheatley: a study in Labour history', unpublished PhD diss., Glasgow 1973, 130–1.

[12] G. Brown, 'The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland, 1918–1929: the politics of five elections', unpublished PhD diss., Edinburgh 1982, 168–91; I. G. C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland 1832–1924: parties, elections and issues*, Edinburgh 1986, 318–28.

[13] R. K. Middlemas, *The Clydesiders: a left-wing struggle for parliamentary power*, London 1965, 88–113; Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People*, 259–71.

[14] Ibid. 270–1; Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland*, 277–308.

disruptive.'[15] The United Free Church was slower to relinquish the vision of social reconstruction. At its General Assembly of 1921 the Social Problems Committee submitted a report condemning 'a social order on which the prevailing motive is selfish gain' and advocating stronger efforts to bridge the widening gulf between the labour movement and the Church. The report, however, was challenged from the floor of the assembly by members who objected that it showed a bias to the poor. The gospel, argued David MacQueen of Glasgow, was 'for the rich as well as for the poor' and the Church 'must not enter into a league with one side of society'. Following a vote, the offending portions of the report were removed, and after 1921 the Social Problems Committee increasingly shifted its attention from social and industrial reform to less contentious issues of personal morality.

In 1925 Dr John White of the Barony Church, Glasgow, became moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland – in recognition of his leadership in both the Established Church and the Church Union movement. Born in 1867, the son of a flour merchant from a West Scotland village, White had been educated at Glasgow University, where he had come under the influence of the Hegelian idealism of Professor Edward Caird. White was a Tory paternalist, who looked back to a pre-industrial social order in which the National Church had exercised authority over a hierarchy of social ranks, teaching the duties, as well as the rights, of wealth and status. He had been a fiercely patriotic preacher during the war, and had served for over a year as a chaplain at the Western Front. During the war he had supported the Church's call for post-war reconstruction, and in 1919 he became a co-convener of the new Church and Nation committee. White was sensitive to the pervasive social misery and sympathised with working-class aspirations for improved conditions, but he opposed what he viewed as the materialism and class envy of the Labour movement. His over-riding concern in the mid-1920s, however, was not the social crisis; rather, it was to complete the unification of the Presbyterian Churches. A leader in the Union movement from its beginning, White's close connections with leading Conservative politicians had proved invaluable in the smooth passage of the parliamentary acts of 1921 and 1925, which cleared away legal obstacles to the Union.[16] Once union had been achieved, he argued, the National Church of Scotland would be in a position to provide the spiritual and moral leadership needed to heal class divisions and restore communal harmony. He was confident that, although 'Church and nation were passing through the crucible', a new unity was being forged.[17] White's counterpart in the United Free Church was Alexander Martin, principal of New College, Edinburgh, and acknowledged leader of the Church, who

[15] *The Diaries of W. P. Paterson*, ed. C. L. Rawlins, Edinburgh 1987, 266.

[16] A. Muir, *John White*, London 1958, passim.

[17] See, for example the report of White's speech before the Presbytery of Dundee, *Scotsman*, 25 Nov. 1925.

shared White's confidence that Church Union would inaugurate a new era for Scotland. Amid the social crisis of the 1920s, White and Martin worked to keep their Churches' attention focused on the Union movement.

Not everyone was pleased with the Churches' concentration on ecclesiastical politics and the seemingly endless discussions of the theological issues of Presbyterian Union. One anonymous correspondent complained to White on 21 February 1926 that 'the common people have been more or less ignored by the Church. Ministers have wasted themselves on theological controversies and vague theoretical abstractions, which had little meaning for the ordinary man in the fierce economic struggle to make a living'. Nor did this writer accept the Church's claim that it was no 'respector of persons' and was even-handed in preaching Christian morality to both rich and poor. On the contrary, he observed, too many clergy were quick to condemn from the pulpit any excesses on the part of trade unions or working-class agitators, while maintaining a discreet silence regarding the ill-gotten gains of war-profiteers and unjust employers. 'For the Church to condemn the people', he continued, 'will not do. We must remember that in the War, taken as a whole, the common people came out of it well and the Church rather indifferently.'[18] By the mid-1920s the Presbyterian Churches had indeed grown silent on social questions. This silence was comfortable for the well-off, crowding into suburban churches, seeking to put the memories of the war behind them, and congratulating their leaders on the progress towards union. It could be painful for those who were experiencing poverty, unemployment and inadequate housing.

The industrial crisis of 1926 developed out of the deteriorating state of the post-war British coal industry, which was weakened by the shrinking of overseas markets and the glut of cheap coal resulting from the German war reparations. Even more seriously, coal mining in Britain suffered from antiquated methods and inefficient organisation. The miners were forced to accept a reduction in wages following a prolonged lock-out in 1921. A further reduction of wages was averted in 1925 when the threat of strike action convinced the government that it should subsidise the ailing industry. However, this was to be only an interim measure, pending the outcome of a full-scale enquiry into the industry. Then in March 1926 Baldwin's Conservative government announced that on the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry headed by Herbert Samuel, it had decided to end the interim subsidy. Negotiations between the coal-owners' association and the miners' union failed to produce an agreement on how to cut production costs in response to the withdrawal of the subsidy, and on 30 April 1926 the owners gave notice of a further reduction in miners' wages. When their union refused to

[18] 'Man in the Pew' to John White, 21 Feb. 1926, John White Papers, New College Library, Edinburgh, Box 24.

accept the reductions, the miners were locked out. Throughout the negotiations in April the Trades Union Congress made it clear that its members would stand by the miners. Behind this promise of working-class solidarity was the belief that the successful imposition of wage reductions for coal miners would be followed by wage reductions in other industries – as had been the case in 1921. When the Baldwin government declined to intervene to stop the lock-out of the miners, the TUC ordered a 'co-ordinated industrial action', which began at midnight on 3 May 1926. Throughout Britain, an estimated four million stopped work; transport, communications, services, and many industries were brought to a near standstill. Baldwin quickly labelled the action an attempt by organised Labour to usurp the powers of parliament and undermine the constitution.

With the onset of the General Strike, the economic crisis and social deprivations of the 1920s were brought forcibly to the attention of the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland. After the claims made by the Churches to moral and spiritual leadership over the whole of Scottish society, Presbyterian leaders could hardly 'sit with folded hands' amid the conflict. The pressure on Scottish church leaders to do something was increased by the highly visible role played by leaders in the Church of England, and especially by Randall Davidson, the archbishop of Canterbury. Before the beginning of the lock-out, Davidson met representatives of the mine-owners, miners and government, in an effort to mediate a settlement. He continued his efforts after the beginning of the General Strike. On 7 May, after consultations with the leaders of several denominations in England, Davidson issued an appeal to all parties for 'simultaneous and concurrent' concessions and a resumption of negotiations. For many Conservative opponents of the General Strike, the recommendation that the Government make concessions to socialist revolutionaries was little short of treason. Under pressure from the government, J. C. W. Reith, the Director-General of the BBC and son of the principal clerk of the United Free Church General Assembly, refused to broadcast the archbishop's appeal – though it was printed in a number of newspapers, including the *Scotsman*, one of the few Scottish papers to continue publication throughout the strike. Davidson came under bitter attack from Conservatives for his intervention.[19] For others, however, his appeal was even-handed and courageous.

At the beginning of the strike, on 5 May, the Christian Socialist and master of Balliol College, Oxford, A. D. Lindsay, invited the leaders of the Church of Scotland to join in a general appeal by all the British Churches for peace, concessions on all sides, and a resumption of negotiations. Lindsay was of Scots Presbyterian background and had many friends within the Scottish Churches and universities. However, John White, the moderator of the Church of Scotland, angrily rejected Lindsay's invitation

[19] Bell, *Randall Davidson*, ii. 1304–18.

– in large part, no doubt, because of his objections to Lindsay's Labour politics. Instead, White arranged with Dr James Harvey, moderator of the United Free Church and a fellow Conservative, to issue a statement on the strike from the two Presbyterian Churches alone, as the representatives of Scotland's national religion.[20]

On Sunday 9 May, church attendance in Edinburgh was reported to be twice the average size, and the same was probably true elsewhere in Scotland. The clergy were divided in their responses to the crisis.[21] While some Presbyterian ministers enthusiastically employed their pulpits to condemn the strike, others declined to do so. James Harvey, moderator of the United Free Church, denounced in his sermon not only the strike but trade unionism in general as an unChristian curb on the industry and ambitions of individual workers.[22] On the other hand, the Revd D. Bruce Nicol of St Mark's Dundee, reported that although strongly urged by members of his congregation to denounce the strike from his pulpit, 'sympathy with the poorly paid wage-earners, and some experience and understanding of their lot, persuaded me to keep silence'.[23] On the following Monday the joint statement of the moderators of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church appeared in the *Scotsman*. Despite Harvey's strong condemnation of the strike on Sunday morning, the joint statement was moderate in tone. It called for prayer 'for the healing of the wounds of the nation' and for an end to the suffering caused to the public at large by the dispute. Although the moderators claimed that the Church was not competent to pronounce on the political and economic aspects of the crisis, they also asserted that it was self-evident 'to every thinking man who loves his country that industrial disputes should never be allowed to become a menace to the very existence of the community'.[24] In short, they focused on the evils of the General Strike, while at the same time arguing that the Church was not competent to discuss the issues of economic deprivation and inequality that lay behind it. Opposition to the strike was more forcibly expressed by Principal Alexander Martin of New College, the leading figure in the United Free church. In an angry letter to the *Scotsman*, Martin criticised the archbishop of Canterbury's appeal for a renewal of negotiations. 'We are faced', Martin asserted, 'with the attempt of a self-constituted minority to impose its will upon the community by sheer weight of *force majeure*.' There could be no negotiating with such an evil; the General Strike must be broken 'at whatever cost'.[25]

[20] Telegraphs from A. D. Lindsay to Professor Archibald Main of Glasgow University, 5, 6 May 1926; A. Main to J. White, 5 May 1926; J. White to A. Main, copy, n.d., John White Papers, Box 24.

[21] [Anon.], 'The Church and the General Strike', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (June 1926), 249–52.

[22] I. MacDougall, 'The 1926 General Strike in Edinburgh', unpublished typescript 1960, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 5695, Edinburgh General Strike, 1926, 32.

[23] 'D. Bruce Nicol to the Editor', *Scotsman*, 20 May 1926.

[24] *Scotsman*, 10 May 1926. See also Lord Sands to John White, 7 May 1926, John White Papers, Box 24.

[25] *Scotsman*, 10 May 1926.

Two days later, on 12 May, the *Scotsman* published a leading article on 'The Church and the Crisis', in which it praised the Scottish Presbyterian Churches for their response to the strike, and in particular applauded the Scottish Presbyterian leaders for refusing to endorse the archbishop of Canterbury's appeal. Unlike some church leaders in England, the *Scotsman* maintained, the Scottish Presbyterian Churches had the wisdom to recognise that the Church had no competence 'to intermeddle in the sphere of economic law', and that Christ had refused to be made 'a judge or a divider' over men in this world. The Scottish Churches, moreover, understood that 'there can be no compromise between law and rebellion, between order and chaos'.[26] The Church's place was to preach the gospel of individual salvation and to leave social arrangements in this world to the authority of 'the powers that be' and the economic laws. That same day, 12 May, the TUC leadership in London acknowledged defeat and called off the General Strike unconditionally. The miners were left to struggle on alone against the lock-out.

'What a relief it is to know that the General Strike is over', the young Archie Craig, minister of Erskine, wrote on 13 May to a miner whom he had been helping financially during the crisis. 'I hope that the miners won't be long of getting back, and then we'll hope for better days all over the country.'[27] Craig's optimism about the prospects for a just settlement of the miners' claims was shared by other socially concerned clergy. One of these was J. Harry Miller of the United Free Church, lecturer on sociology at New College and warden of the New College student settlement in the Pleasance, a deprived district of Edinburgh. On the day the strike ended, Miller wrote to the *Scotsman* to protest against its leading article of a few days before, which had suggested that the Scottish Presbyterian clergy did not empathise with the plight of the miners or support their struggle. The truth, Miller maintained, was that most Presbyterian clergy did recognise the justice of the miners' claims. However, they had been unable to condone the General Strike because of its challenge to constitutional government: 'by this action our hands were tied and our lips were sealed'. Now that the General Strike had been called off, Miller further insisted, the clergy were 'set free to give what help they can to the real problem which faces us in the coal industry' and the nation would soon see the Church taking an active role to secure a just settlement.[28] Even Principal Martin of New College wrote to the *Scotsman* on the day the General Strike ended to say that although he had strongly condemned the strike, he sympathised with the miners' struggle for improved wages and conditions. The miner's life was a hard one, and if the public had been more sensitive to their needs and aspirations, matters

[26] *Scotsman*, 12 May 1926.

[27] Archie Craig to Harry Galloway, 13 May 1926, A. C. Craig Papers, Bundle 3, New College Library, Edinburgh.

[28] *Scotsman*, 13 May 1926. See also the response of T. Drummond Shiels, the Edinburgh Labour MP, to Miller's letter, *Scotsman*, 18 May 1926.

would not have come to this crisis. However, Martin added, it was 'cheering' to note that the challenge to the constitution had been called off, so that attention could now be directed to the miners' real needs.[29]

Meanwhile, in an unprecedented action, Presbyterian leaders had decided to postpone the meetings of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church which were scheduled to begin on 18 May. The General Strike had interrupted the normal printing and mailing of Assembly reports and papers, and two further weeks were needed to complete preparations for the assemblies. The assemblies met briefly on the 18 May, but then adjourned until the beginning of June. But before the adjournment the moderators of both assemblies had delivered pronouncements on the General Strike. For James Harvey, moderator of the United Free Church, the defeat of the strike had been nothing less than a 'victory for God' – a sign of God's active role in human history which should summon individuals back to the fundamentals of faith. Indeed, Harvey maintained, Christians could now expect that God's intervention against the strikers would be followed by an outpouring of his Holy Spirit: the time was ripe for a revival of religion in Scotland. John White, moderator of the Church of Scotland, took a more moderate line. The General Strike, he asserted, had been a grievous mistake which had threatened both the political constitution and the social welfare of the community. But now it was over, and the time had come for peace and reconciliation between the warring social classes and social interests. Where Harvey focused on the revivalist dimension, White placed his emphasis on the moral influence which the National Church of Scotland should exercise over all social classes. However, this was not to say that the Church should pronounce on specific economic issues or the politics of the coal crisis: 'The "reconciling of rights"', White insisted, 'was a function of the State.' But the Church did have the responsibility to represent to the nation the communal values – 'those human relations and obligations which industrialism often pushed into the background'. The National Church alone could reconcile people on the basis of their common humanity and essential equality before God. The strike, he maintained, demonstrated the need to strengthen the territorial ministry of the National Church, in order to revive a sense of community and mutual responsibility at the parish level. White's speech aroused enthusiasm among those present and was fully reported in the newspapers. Yet, behind the eloquence, his remarks were vague and even contradictory. On the one hand, White maintained that the Church should assume a role of national leadership and work to reconcile the warring classes and interests. On the other hand, however, the Church was not to meddle in economic or political matters. How the Church was to reconcile the social classes without touching on specific questions of political rights or economic interests was not made clear. Rather, White's

[29] *Scotsman*, 13 May 1926.

closing recommendation to the Church was that its best course at the present time was one of 'silence' – 'the silence of study and prayer'.[30]

After the moderators' addresses, the assemblies adjourned for two weeks. During the interval, the Churches had their 'silence' disrupted by an unexpected request from the executive council of the National Union of Scottish Mine Workers, which asked permission to send a deputation to the two General Assemblies in order to put before them the miners' case. The deputation would consist of three Scottish Labour MPs and miners' union officials – Robert Smillie, James Brown and William Adamson – all representatives of the moderate wing of the Scottish Labour party.[31] James Brown was an elder in the Church of Scotland and in 1924 had been appointed by Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government to the office of lord high commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Brown was active in support of the Church Union movement, and was a personal friend of John White.[32] William Adamson was a Conservative union leader from the Fifeshire coal fields and an active member of the Baptist Church. As secretary of state for Scotland in the Labour government of 1924, he had rendered assistance to the Church Union movement.[33] Smillie was the long-time president of the National Union of Scottish Mine Workers, and the Church of Scotland moderator's 'best known parishioner'.[34]

The request from the miners' union placed the General Assemblies in a difficult position. On the one hand the request could be viewed as an appeal to the moral authority of the soon-to-be-reunited National Church of Scotland. In his moderator's address of 18 May John White had offered the Church's services as a mediator in the coal dispute, while such leaders as Alexander Martin and J. Harry Miller had asserted in the newspapers that the Church was prepared to assist the miners now that the General Strike had been called off. The Scottish miners' union executive was taking up the Church leaders' offer of aid, and for the General Assemblies to refuse them a hearing would be to acknowledge that the offer of mediation had been empty rhetoric. On the other hand, for the assemblies to receive the miners' deputation would involve 'meddling' in the social and economic sphere. Conservative middle- and upper-class Church members might well resent the unprecedented reception of a trade union deputation so soon after the General Strike. Further, the mining communities were notorious for their irreligion, and there were doubts about the sincerity of the union executive's appeal. One who opposed admitting the deputation was Lord Sands, the procurator of the General

[30] *Scotsman*, 19 May 1926; *Glasgow Herald*, 19 May 1926.

[31] National Union of Scottish Mine Workers, Executive Committee Minutes, 26 May 1926, National Library of Scotland, Dep. 227 (86).

[32] A. Gammie, *From Pit to Palace: the life story of the Rt. Hon. James Brown, M.P.*, London [1931], 54–129; Muir, *John White*, 208; R. Sjolinder, *Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland*, Stockholm 1962, 345–6; W. Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918–1939*, Edinburgh 1984, 70–1. [33] Muir, *John White*, 237; Knox, *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918–1939*, 58–61.

[34] 'The General Assembly', *Life and Work* (Jul. 1926), 150.

Assembly of the Church of Scotland, a leader in the Union movement with special competence in Church finances, the co-convener with White of the Church and Nation Committee, and a leading Scottish Tory. Sands feared that in receiving the deputation, the Church might be seen as sympathising with the miners. As Sands wrote to White on 21 May, 'I am a little apprehensive of the public effect of the miners appearing before the assembly and presenting a lot of "sob stuff", being accorded a sympathetic hearing and [being] dismissed with a benediction.' If the deputation were allowed to appear, it should be confronted by the assembly with the imperatives of 'economic law' which alone determined the miners' wage levels.[35]

Not surprisingly, among those who opposed reception of the deputation was Sir Adam Nimmo, secretary of the Scottish Coal Owners Association. The miners' appeal, Nimmo insisted to White on 28 May, would divert attention from 'the economic facts', and would be 'not only confusing but misleading to the public mind'.[36] On 31 May, moreover, Sir Arthur Steel Maitland, minister of Labour in the Conservative government, an elder in the Church of Scotland, and a member of the assembly's Church Union Committee, wrote a 'strictly private and confidential' letter to recommend against admitting the deputation. 'The motive of the miners', he asserted, 'is of course sheer propaganda.' Their style of argument, Maitland further argued, 'gives an entirely wrong impression of affairs, which the ordinary man does not understand'. If the miners' deputation were to be permitted to appear, someone would also need to be invited to present the coal-owners' case, which was, Maitland added, the stronger one.[37] But this would only involve the assemblies in economic debates which were beyond the competency of the Church. In view of the sympathy for the miners being expressed in England by such respected Anglican leaders as A. D. Lindsay and William Temple, it was hardly surprising that a member of the Baldwin government should discourage the Scottish General Assemblies from giving what might appear to be a sympathetic hearing to the miners' position. There may also have been fear within the government that the assembly might find the miners' arguments convincing.

To their credit, White and other Presbyterian leaders decided that the assemblies could not shut their doors to the miners' deputation. During the war the Presbyterian Churches had pledged themselves to work for the Kingdom of God in Scotland, while the professed aim of the Church Union movement was to restore the spiritual and moral authority of the National Church. To refuse the miners' appeal to the Churches in the present crisis would be to admit that the hopes of reviving the social

[35] Lord Sands [Christopher N. Johnston] to John White, 21 May 1926, John White Papers, Box 24.

[36] Sir Adam Nimmo to John White, 28 May 1926, John White Papers, Box 24.

[37] Arthur Steel Maitland to Dr Dunlop, 'Strictly Private and Confidential', 31 May 1926, John White Papers, Box 24.

authority of Scottish Presbyterianism over all classes were doomed to failure. It would also be to admit that society, even a Christian society, was powerless in the face of the economic laws. In a letter to Sir Adam Nimmo of the Scottish Coal Owners Association on 29 May, White acknowledged 'that good will cannot override economic laws'. But he was also unwilling to accept that nothing could be done to alleviate the very real deprivation in the mining districts. 'Surely', he pleaded,

> there is some way of placing the industry on a basis that would pay a living wage, and give a moderate return to capital. Are we after all a nation of amateurs? To say that there is no way out is a confession of economic failure, or worse still it is to say that Britain's day as an industrial force is at an end.[38]

The two General Assemblies, then, agreed to receive the miners' deputation but only after first inviting the Scottish Coal Owners Association to send a deputation to present their side in the dispute.

In the event, the coal-owners declined to send a deputation. The miners' deputation of Smillie, Adamson and Brown, however, did come and appeared first before the United Free Church General Assembly on 2 June. They were introduced by Principal Martin, who undermined their appeal from the outset by emphasising that while the assembly might consider the human suffering and hardship causing by the dispute, the economic and political issues at stake were beyond the Church's competency. Smillie was the main speaker, presenting a graphic account of the hardships endured by the miners and defending the justice of the miners' claim for a living wage. Adamson spoke next, arguing for the reorganisation of all industry on the basis of co-operation. The most impassioned words, however, came from James Brown, the former lord high commissioner. 'With all the responsibility that attached to him as a Churchman', Brown asserted, he could never recommend that the miners accept the conditions dictated by the mine owners, adding that he would 'rather lead their men out into the wilderness and die, than accept the terms they were asked to accept.' After the deputation had concluded, the moderator reminded the assembly that they had heard only one side of the dispute, and pointed out again that they were not competent to comment on economic and political issues. The deputation was thanked for the moderation of their appeal, and politely applauded. However, according to George Reith, the principal clerk of the assembly, private conversations in the lobby and hallways revealed that a large majority of ministers and elders were hostile to the miners' union.[39] A few days later, on 5 June, the deputation (though now without Brown) appeared before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In his response to their appeal John White drew attention to the dangerous working conditions faced by the miners and to the fact that many miners had given military service during the war. They were, in short, part of the Scottish nation, and the Church

[38] John White to Sir Adam Nimmo, 29 May 1926, John White Papers, Box 24.

[39] *Proceedings and Debates*, 1926, 105–8; G. M. Reith, *Reminiscences of the United Free Church General Assembly (1900–1929)*, Edinburgh 1933, 293–9.

should not wish to see them broken. Only through 'reason and compromise', White observed, 'was there the least hope of permanent peace or social betterment'.[40]

On 7 June the Conservative prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, accompanied by his secretary for Scotland, Sir John Gilmour, paid an unprecedented visit to the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church. In contrast to the cool reception afforded the miners' deputation, Baldwin was given a hero's welcome in both assemblies for the firm stand he had taken against the General Strike. In his speech introducing Baldwin to the Church of Scotland Assembly, White was fulsome in praise of his 'fairness', 'abounding sympathy' and 'fearless stand for principle'. Baldwin, White averred, had 'the warm support of all the members of the Church of Scotland'.[41] In the wake of Baldwin's triumphant visit, the Scottish Coal Owners Association issued a public statement in response to the addresses of the miners' deputation, in which they rejected the deputation's claims and rebuffed the Churches' offer of mediation. According to the principal clerk of the United Free Church assembly, members of that assembly were delighted with the statement. In the Church of Scotland, however, White was clearly annoyed. He assured the assembly on 9 June that, 'The Church could not discuss the questions of economics or the politics of the situation, but it certainly was called on to fulfil the function of a mediator'.[42]

White made a final effort to press forward the Presbyterian Church's offer of mediation. Three days after the close of the General Assemblies, on 12 June, he wrote to both the executive of the National Union of Scottish Mine Workers and Sir Adam Nimmo of the Scottish Coal Owners Association, offering the services of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church. While the Churches 'could not enter into the economic factors of the dispute', they wished to work for reconciliation by bringing the miners and owners together for talks. A few days later White presented his offer of mediation to the Scottish Churches Council, a national association of Protestant Churches of which he was president. 'It is becoming clearer day by day', he asserted, 'that the nation is face to face with something more than economic theory and commercial arithmetic.... The plight of the nation presents a moral question that cannot be satisfactorily answered in terms of profit and loss.'[43]

The secretary of the miners' union expressed appreciation for the Churches' offer, which he promised to put before the next meeting of the executive committee. Replying on behalf of the coal-owners, however, Nimmo wrote on 21 June that there was no place for mediation. The owners were simply responding to the economic laws in imposing wage

[40] *Scotsman*, 7 June 1926; *British Weekly*, 10 June 1926.

[41] *Proceedings and Debates* 1926, 273; Reith, *Reminiscences*, 295–9; John White, 'Speech requesting the General Assembly to welcome Stanley Baldwin to its meeting', unpublished typescript, John White Papers, Box 23, folder labelled 'General Assemblies, 1923–27'.

[42] *Scotsman*, 10 June 1926. [43] *Scotsman*, 19 June 1926; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 June 1926.

reductions. 'It is', he chided, 'the failure to recognise the economic facts that has led to much misunderstanding and misdirection in the press and in the public mind.' Moreover, 'it is impossible for anyone with any degree of fairness to say that the miners do not get a fair and square deal or that they are not treated in a spirit of conciliation'. With the refusal of the coal-owners to consider the Church's offer of mediation, the matter was closed. White published the whole correspondence in the newspapers, though without comment.[44] There was little he could have said. Nimmo had reminded White of what the Presbyterian Churches had themselves been repeating during the past five years, since the defeat of the social progressives – that the economy was governed by the laws of the competitive market-place and that the Church had no competence to 'meddle' in political or economic matters. According to the Church's own principles, there was no place for its mediation. It would have to watch quietly from the sidelines as economic and political power, which now clearly lay with the coal-owners and Baldwin's Conservative government, prevailed. After power had prevailed, the Churches could express their sympathy for the labouring poor in the time-honoured fashion of charitable rescue work for the individual victims of industrial capitalism. White and other Presbyterian leaders offered no criticism of the mine-owners for refusing to co-operate in any way with the Churches' call for reconciliation and a just settlement. Their silence in response to the mine-owners' rebuff seemed to indicate their acquiescence.

While the combined offer of mediation by the Presbyterian Churches was being rejected, the United Free Church was pursuing an independent plan for the Scottish mining communities. Since early 1926 the United Free Church had been organising a major evangelistic campaign which was to be conducted among the mining communities of West Fife.[45] A primary purpose of the campaign was to confront socialism, which the organisers regarded as the enemy of Christianity. Against socialism, with its doctrines of class conflict and historical materialism, the United Free Church proposed to advance with the evangelical gospel of personal salvation and individual self-help. They had selected the mining communities of West Fife, because it was there that socialism in Scotland seemed to be most advanced. Their choice seemed to have been confirmed by the General Strike. In introducing the proposed campaign before the United Free Church General Assembly on 7 June 1926 (five days after the assembly's reception of the miners' deputation), Daniel Lamont of the Church Life and Social Problems Committee referred to West Fife as the scene of an historic confrontation between the forces of good and evil. 'It

[44] *Glasgow Herald*, 28 June 1926.

[45] 'Report of the committee on church life and social problems', in *Reports to the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland*, 1926, no. v. 3–4; J. Hall, 'A great Fifeshire campaign', *The Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church of Scotland* (Apr. 1926), 167.

was just in such a place', Lamont proclaimed, 'that they would find the fighting line where the enemy was battling. The enemy was at his strongest there, and so there the whole Church should gather.' The West Fife campaign, he added, was only the first stage in a larger offensive, destined to turn the 'opposing tide'.[46] As an indication of its commitment to the West Fife campaign, the United Free Church had selected as the new moderator for the General Assembly of 1926 Dr George Herbert Morrison of Wellington Church, Glasgow – a popular author of devotional books and an advocate of revivalistic methods in the Church. In his opening and closing addresses to that assembly, Morrison asserted that God had intervened to defeat the General Strike and that recent events demonstrated that conditions were ripe for the outpouring of the spirit and a revival of religion in Scotland.[47] In its June number, the *Record* of the United Free Church argued that the 'ultimate cause' of the General Strike was to be found 'in a general discontent with the present order of society' which was the result of working-class materialism and class envy. Society, then, was in need of a religious revival that would turn the attention of the people towards spiritual values and diminish discontent with the established order.[48]

Throughout the summer of 1926 the organisers made careful preparations. They decided to focus their efforts on four towns, Cowdenbeath, Lochgelly, Kelty and Glencraig, which had a combined population of about 60,000. Working with the existing churches in the area, the organisers formed a local 'trained corps of visitors', booked halls, and prepared tracts and leaflets.[49] Then, during the first two weeks of October, approximately twenty clergymen from outside the district descended upon the four West Fife mining towns. By this time, the miners throughout Britain had been out of work for over five months and the communities of West Fife were suffering grievous deprivation. During the summer, poor relief scales had been cut by 20 per cent or more, and the Labour-controlled parishes of West Fife were hard-pressed to pay allowances from their diminished resources.[50] Despite the widespread suffering, the standing committees of the two Presbyterian Churches had provided no special material assistance to those communities. 'Over the whole area', the organisers later reported, 'hung an uncanny quiet. The tension was something that could be felt. With some misgiving the Mission was ventured upon.'[51]

The evangelists visited homes, distributed leaflets, preached at street

[46] *Proceedings and Debates*, 1926, 278.

[47] A. Gammie, *Dr. George H. Morrison: his life and work*, London, 1928, 123–9.

[48] [Anon.] 'The Church and the General Strike', 249–52.

[49] 'Report of the committee on church life and social problems', *Reports of the Committees of the General Assembly of the United Free Church* 1927, no. v. 1–2; J. D. Hall, 'The Church and the miner: notes on the West Fife campaign', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Nov. 1926), 478–80.

[50] I. Levitt, *Poverty and Welfare in Scotland 1890–1948*, Edinburgh 1988, 127–30.

[51] W. R. Forrester, 'The West Fife Campaign', in Gammie, *George Morrison*, 134.

corners, and conducted evening meetings. It demanded courage to appear before hungry, often embittered men and women, and some speakers displayed considerable zeal and earned the miners' respect. But their courage and enthusiasm were not enough to win many converts in communities which were hardened by months of deprivation and which felt abandoned by the rest of the country. The campaign was soon foundering. In the second week the moderator of the United Free Church, George H. Morrison, arrived in West Fife to revive the campaign. His first engagement was an evening meeting at the Miners' Institute at Glencraig. There he was confronted by challenges from Communist and Roman Catholic miners, and the meeting broke up in disorder. Although Morrison was shaken by the experience and wanted to leave that evening, the organisers persuaded him to appear at two more meetings at Glencraig the next day. More questions were thrown at him concerning the economic laws, the nature of God, and human responsibility. Fearing violence, he left West Fife that evening.[52] The West Fife campaign was brought to an end a few days later. It had failed to penetrate the solidarity of the mining communities with the gospel of personal salvation and individual self-help.[53] It had not provided the spark for a religious revival that could sweep through the depressed areas of industrial Scotland, end working-class discontent with the existing social structure, and restore the moral and spiritual authority of the Presbyterian Churches as they approached their ecclesiastical union. The campaign reflected a degree of insensitivity on the part of its organisers, who seemed intent upon using the distress in the mining communities for their own ecclesiastical purposes.

The miners' resistance was finally broken in December 1926, and they were forced to return to the pits on the owners' conditions, which included increased hours and reduced wages. Despite assurances by the owners that there would be no victimisation, the promises were not kept, and the government declined to intervene on behalf of those not allowed to return to work. In many respects 1927 was bleaker in the Scottish mining communities than 1926, with families deeply in debt, many men unable to return to work, and the hope of victory through solidarity broken. Jennie Lee, who taught school in a Fifeshire mining community in 1927, later recalled the misery and despair. She had found it largely futile trying to teach in barren rooms, without books or supplies, while the children were underfed and lacked adequate winter clothing, and after a year she resigned to devote herself to socialist agitation.[54] Again, there is no evidence that the General Assembly committees provided special material

[52] Ibid. 134–8; interview with Professor Norman Porteous, who had been a participant in the West Fife campaign.

[53] 'It would not be true to say', reported one of the participants, the Revd Harry Law, 'that we have touched the heart of the community': 'The miners must be won', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Oct. 1926), 432.

[54] J. Lee, *Tomorrow is a New Day*, London 1939, 90–122.

assistance to the distressed communities. In April 1927 the United Free Church made another attempt to spark a religious revival in West Fife, this time sending student volunteers from Edinburgh's New College. However, the student evangelists were no more effective against 'hard-bitten communists out of the pits' than their predecessors had been. While no doubt excellent experience for the students, the price of yet another failure was, as one observer noted, 'too dear for the Church to pay'.[55]

At the General Assembly of 1927, John Mansie, convener of the Church Life and Social Problems Committee of the United Free Church, reviewed the West Fife campaign and endeavoured to mend some of the damage. He now denied that the United Free Church had ever regarded the mining communities as enemy territory. 'They did not select West Fife', he assured the assembly, 'because they thought of miners as being farther off from the kingdom of God than other people. They did not regard West Fife as a black country in any moral or spiritual sense. It was not true to say that miners as a class were outside the Church.' Further, Mansie denied that the Church was at war with either the Labour party or socialism: 'they were not out to attack any political party, or any theory of social reconstruction unless it threatened the vitals of the Christian faith'. This was not, however, what had been said in the assembly the year before, when members of the Committee had spoken of 'fighting lines' and 'corps of visitors' and 'the enemy at his strongest' in West Fife. The Church had gained something from the failure in West Fife – appreciation for the human endurance and communal solidarity which existed outside the structures of the Church. But the perception in West Fife that United Free Church evangelists had sought to use the suffering in the mining communities for their own ecclesiastical purposes would not be easily laid to rest.

'We do not want a political church,' wrote the Edinburgh Labour MP, T. Drummond Shiels, in the *Scotsman* of 18 May 1926, 'but we do want a church which is not afraid to stand up for the underdog, even when he is behaving not too wisely.' For Shiels, the response of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church to the General Strike had been weak and self-seeking. Their leaders denounced the strike while refusing to discuss the economic distress that lay behind it. They watched in silence as wealth and power prevailed. What most disturbed Shiels, however, was the Churches' insistence that they adhered to a strict principle of non-interference in political and economic issues. On the contrary, Shiels observed, the Presbyterian Church courts and committees were all too prepared to meddle in political and economic matters when they believed it was in their interest to do so.[56]

[55] 'Report of the Committee on Church Life and Social Problems', *Reports of the Committees of the General Assembly of the United Free Church*, 1927, no. v. 4; A. H. Dunnett, *The Church in Changing Scotland*, London [1934], 124.

[56] T. Drummond Shiels to the Editor, *Scotsman*, 18 May 1926.

This was illustrated in the campaign which the Churches conducted during much of the 1920s against Roman Catholics of Irish descent living in the west of Scotland. In the general election of 1922 the Scoto-Irish Roman Catholic community of about 600,000 had given its support to the Labour party and this had contributed to a dramatic surge of Labour strength in Scotland. Labour had won ten of the fifteen Glasgow area parliamentary seats in 1922, and the 'Clydeside' MPs were soon attracting national attention for their outspoken condemnation of slum housing and mass unemployment. A few months after the general election, in May 1923, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland instructed its Church and Nation Committee to organise a national campaign against the 'menace' of Irish immigration. John White, co-convener of that committee, became the leading figure in the campaign. The United Free Church was drawn into the movement, and a joint committee set up to co-ordinate efforts. The Presbyterian Churches sought to convince the government not only to halt further Irish Catholics immigration into Scotland but also to deport Scoto-Irish Catholics who received poor relief, required care in state hospitals, or had criminal records. The campaign reached its high point in 1926. Early in the year John White, in his official capacity as convener of the Church and Nation Committee of the Established Church, wrote to Sir John Gilmour, the Conservative secretary of state for Scotland, to press the government for immediate steps to 'safeguard Scottish nationality'. The letter, published in the report of the Church and Nation Committee for 1926, referred to Irish Catholics as an 'inferior race' and asserted that their 'presence tends to lower the social conditions'. 'Scotland', White continued, 'is being gradually divided into two great racial camps... . These two races do not fuse to any appreciable extent.'[57] In September 1926 a deputation from the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church met the under-secretary of state for Scotland, Sir John Lamb, to press for state action against the Scoto-Irish Catholics. At this meeting, the Revd Duncan Cameron of the Church of Scotland drew Lamb's attention to the connection between the 'Irish Catholic menace' and the recent industrial crisis. 'During the General Strike in the industrial areas', Cameron informed Lamb, 'nearly all the leaders were Irish. In the course of time instead of a Scottish proletariat there would be a body of people who had no regard for the United Kingdom and who were prone to revolutionary ideas.'[58] Church leaders, in short, did intervene in political matters when they believed it was in the interest of their ecclesiastical authority to do so. In 1926, while professing to have no competency to pronounce on the political and economic aspects of the General Strike Presbyterian leaders were pressing for legislation directed against the

[57] *Reports on the Schemes*, 1926, 619–23.

[58] 'Report of Deputation from the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland, received by Sir John Lamb on behalf of the Secretary of State... September 24th, 1926', typescript, p. 11, in John White Papers, Box 9, 'Irish Immigration'.

Scoto-Irish Catholic community, as a means, in part, of upholding the existing social order.

The Presbyterian Churches had not been neutral during the General Strike and the crisis in the coal industry. Presbyterian leaders had denounced the strike while promising that once it had been called off they would work to secure a just settlement for the miners. After the end of the General Strike, however, the Churches had done very little. The General Assemblies of 1926 had been reluctant to receive the miners' deputations. White's efforts to have the Scottish Presbyterian Churches mediate a settlement had been quickly dropped once the mine-owners had indicated their disapproval. The United Free Church revivalist campaign in West Fife had the appearance of an offensive against socialism at a time when the mining communities were suffering defeat and deprivation.

In 1926 the withdrawal of the Presbyterian Churches from their commitment to post-war social reconstruction was confirmed. Under the leadership of John White and Alexander Martin, the Churches became aligned with the Conservative government and associated with the revival of *laissez-faire* capitalism. This alignment was a comfortable one for most Church members, who were middle-class in their background and social attitudes. It was also comfortable for the clergy, many of whom came from rural backgrounds and found it difficult to empathise with urban Labour agitators and working-class aspirations. Nearly half the Church of Scotland ministers in the 1920s had come from the Highlands, while many others, like John White, had come from small Lowland villages. Most had been educated in fee-paying schools.[59] Amid the extraordinary conditions of the war, to be sure, a group of Christian social progressives, championing social equality and co-operation, had briefly exercised a predominant influence in the Church courts. But by the mid-1920s the Scottish middle classes felt threatened and insecure, and were no longer prepared to condone the preaching of Christian Socialism. In the grim and anxious post-war world they longed for a return to the values and social structures of the pre-war years, when their economic position had been secure. Many ministers and members alike had warm memories of the communal life of small towns and villages which they had known in their youth, and which was celebrated in the popular 'Kailyard' fiction. Within the Presbyterian Churches, then, the Christian social progressives, with their call for social reconstruction, had waned in influence as war-time commitments faded.

In 1929 the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church were finally united. The united National Church, it seemed, now had the resources it needed to reassert its national leadership and build a Christian commonwealth in Scotland. But in 1926 it had become clear that for White, Martin, Harvey, Lord Sands and other leaders of the united Church, this Christian commonwealth was to be based upon deference to

[59] M. Maxwell-Arnot, 'Social change and the church of Scotland', in M. Hill (ed.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vii (1974), 91–110.

the 'economic laws'. The Church was to restrict itself to preaching the gospel of personal salvation and individual self-help, while leaving social welfare largely to the impersonal forces of the market-place. The ideal commonwealth would exclude Roman Catholics and would relegate labouring people to the role of a permanent proletariat in a hierarchical social order. It was a backward-looking social vision, which the more democratic Scotland created by the Franchise Act of 1918 was not prepared to accept. 'We aren't all Socialists', observed the Edinburgh novelist, Christine Orr, in 1930. 'Many of us are far too lazy to think things out as logically as all that. But there is a coolness in the air towards a kind of religion which seems to satisfy and inspire, on the whole, one class only, and that the more comfortable one.'[60]

[60] C. Orr, 'A venturing religion', in J. W. Stevenson (ed.), *The Healing of the Nation: the Scottish Church and a waiting people*, Edinburgh 1930, 137.